

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Canada. Thoughts for Today - Hopes for Tomorrow

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Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) initiatives in Canada can be traced back thirty years when pioneering practitioners were seeking ways to assist experienced workers to get credit for their informal learning. Since that time, PLAR processes have been refined and PLAR growth can be seen in many provinces and territories. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is the national voice for PLAR in Canada, advocating for formal recognition of learning accomplishments on behalf of its members.

This article showcases the association's activities, new directions in prior learning assessment and qualification recognition in Canada, holistic approaches to learning recognition, labor force implications, current research, and present challenges.

For the purposes of this article, prior learning assessment and recognition (PLA or PLAR) refers to informal learning acquired through work and life experiences; credentials refer to formal documents issued by academic or licensing authorities; qualifications refer to formal credentials but can also denote other learning achievements relevant to employment.

The History of CAPLA

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is an incorporated, non-profit organization that has been in operation since 1994. It has over 200 members from across Canada and abroad. The Association was created in Belleville, Ontario, thanks primarily to the support of First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) and the efforts of its first president, Paul Zakos. From the beginning, native culture and history have influenced the organization and they continue to have an enduring impact on the Canadian PLA movement. The need to respect adult learners, to be inclusive, to value cultural diversity, to give formal credit for learning achievements, to reduce barriers to labor force participation and to advocate for improvements to the formal educational and credentialing systems has been the legacy.

CAPLA has yearly workshops and has been instrumental in bringing the fields of PLA and formal credential recognition (qualification recognition) together, in order to support the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a holistic enterprise. CAPLA produces regular newsletters, conducts research, and delivers training. Readers may be interested in CAPLA's *Developing Benchmarks for PLAR - Practitioner Perspectives and Guidelines* which can be found on the website (www.capla.ca). CAPLA also maintains the Canada's Portfolio site, which showcases some of Canada's learning accomplishments, along with contact information from across Canada (www.canadasportfolio.ca). These activities illustrate the association's desire to promote international networks for mutual support and resource sharing.

One of the most exciting additions to CAPLA has been its online community of practice and national repository for PLAR resources and research, launched in 2003 (www.recognitionforlearning.ca). The website provides a platform for national and international dialogue amongst PLAR and QR practitioners. CAPLA is beginning to explore web-casting and other technology-supported systems to offer a greater range of access and to foster engagement and knowledge exchange.

Over the past four years, CAPLA has hosted a number of adult learning, recognition, and assessment events for the Government of Canada. The most recent international conference entitled *Recognizing Learning: Recognizing Skills* and sponsored by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, is taking place in Fredericton, New Brunswick this fall. Speakers from around the world will be contributing their ideas, programs, and research. We are pleased that CAEL President Pamela Tate will be a keynote speaker at the Fredericton event.

PLAR in Canada Today: New Uses in the Workplace

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) and qualification recognition (QR) in Canada have evolved into many different areas. At one time, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) was seen almost exclusively as an educational process associated with colleges and universities assessing adult experiential learning for academic credit. Today, its use extends beyond the postsecondary system into the workplace.

Likewise, credentials and qualifications have come to encompass all learning accomplishments, acquired both formally and informally. Even though evaluating non-classroom learning for academic credit continues to be an important focus for PLAR practitioners, skill shortages within the labor market are driving the use of prior learning assessment tools to evaluate competencies in regulated and non-regulated occupations. A number of sector councils in Canada (see the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council and others at www.councils.org) are looking at competency-based assessment against industry standards to evaluate experienced workers and immigrants to Canada.

National organizations such as the Canadian Career Development Foundation are interested in PLAR as a useful process for employment counselors in their work with adults. For example, skills and learning portfolios are being used as career management tools to help adults in transition uncover and market their hidden talents, skills and abilities. This kind of tool is appealing to many career practitioners in light of the increase in temporary, part-time, and contract work. Many human resources professionals, who are interested in retention, recruitment and succession planning, also find that PLAR tools are helpful in employee development, skills recognition, and competency assessment. There are PLAR connections being established by Canadian adult educators and distance educators, as many adult learners who have completed portfolios report on its transformational qualities. Likewise, distance education and training programs that are adult learner-centered are well positioned to offer PLAR first, followed by whatever distance courses are required later, to fill any learning “gaps.”

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges’ Recognition of Learning Affinity Group supports institute and college staff across the country with information sharing and networking on issues related to the recognition of prior learning.

Public Policy and Institutional Leadership in PLAR

In some jurisdictions, policy makers see the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as an integral part of lifelong learning, labor force development, qualification systems, immigration, and access to postsecondary education. For example, provinces such as Manitoba have been integrating it into several departments over the past five years. In June, Alberta hosted a large province-wide PLAR consultation called *Alberta Recognizes Learning*, which succeeded in raising the profile of PLAR to new heights, by demonstrating its use in a variety of sectors locally and nationally.

Several provinces and territories have described PLAR in public policy documents. There have also been special PLAR initiatives across the country. For example, since 1996 the PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia has had great success with portfolio development in a variety of settings, from adults in transition to university-bound professionals. Hundreds of individuals have received PLAR practitioner training through the Centre (www.placentre.ca). The Nova Scotia Community College refers to itself as the "Portfolio College" in recognition of the importance it places on the portfolio learning process. Red River College in Manitoba has also distinguished itself through its PLAR courses and summer institutes, from beginners to advanced levels, both face-to-face and online. First Nations Technical Institute in Ontario is currently undertaking a Human Resources and Social Development Canada funded national research study aimed at testing the ALFI principles of best practice in serving adult learners in a variety of settings.

In Canada, as elsewhere, there are many venues in place to recognize and assess formal credentials. Provincially mandated evaluation centers, community colleges, universities, regulatory bodies, stand-alone organizations, and private trainers all undertake assessment of formal documents. But there is growing concern that assessing formal credentials alone is an inadequate representation of an adult's life learning. Competencies, prior learning accomplishments, essentials skills and abilities must also be measured.

Canadian Research

A new government-funded organization called the Canadian Council on Learning is looking at PLAR through a number of its five knowledge centers. A State of the Field Review, which was commissioned recently, outlined most of the PLAR activities taking place in the provinces and territories and concluded that more research would be needed to fully understand the value of PLAR to Canada and its citizens (www.ccl-cca.ca).

Some interesting research on the unmet demand for PLAR amongst Canadians was revealed in a 2004 study carried out by the Centre for the Study of Education and Work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Statistics from the 2004 National Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning showed that more than half of all Canadian adults and 60 percent of those employed would be more interested in enrolling in further education if their prior informal learning and work experiences were recognized (www.wallnetwork.ca).

The Conference Board of Canada's 2001 study entitled *Brain Gain* also points to the major learning recognition gap, stating that if it were eliminated, Canadians would benefit from an additional \$4.1 billion - \$5.9 billion in income annually (www.conferenceboard.ca).

In 2003, CAPLA undertook a study for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to provide a snapshot of PLAR activities, policies and practices in Canada's public postsecondary institutions. Details on this study can be found at www.cmec.ca/postsec/capla-plar2003.en.pdf.

Looking Forward

Despite these encouraging signs, the growth of PLAR for the most part still seems to be tied to the efforts of individual champions, who are deeply committed to its care and feeding. The limitations of space in this article prevent me from listing all the amazing PLAR research projects and activities currently underway in sector councils, colleges, universities, settlement organizations, occupational bodies, and community groups across Canada. However, incorporating the recognition of prior learning (RPL) into the culture and structure of organizations is a systemic change not fully realized.

The iceberg metaphor, often used to describe the amount of hidden learning all of us possess and about which we are unaware, effectively depicts our challenge in discovering what lies beneath the surface. We continue to struggle to find ways of uncovering it, as individuals, organizations, communities and countries. Because classroom learning is still seen as the only learning that really counts, individuals with uncredentialed knowledge, skills and abilities face huge attitudinal, structural and financial barriers. And while PLAR continues to be about equity, access and social inclusion, it may be economics and our current skills shortage that provide the catalyst to jettison PLAR into the mainstream of Canadian life.